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THE IDEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND OF THE HOLOCAUST

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The millions of murders which took place under the auspices of the Third Reich - meaning the killings of unarmed people in cold blood, as distinct from the killings in the course of military operations - were carried out in the name of an ideology. And that ideology was totally irrational: a mere hotch-potch of ideas stemming from all sorts of quarters and from very different historical periods.

The newest of these ideas was Social Darwinism, which exerted widespread influence in Germany from 1890 onwards. Darwin cannot fairly be held responsible for this perversion of his teaching. He himself never suggested that the species which was best adapted biologically to the demands of the moment was necessarily 'superior' in all respects, nor did he minimise the differences between human beings and animals. Above all, it would never have occurred to him that his hypothesis concerning the survival of the fittest would be used to undermine traditional norms of political and social morality. But that is precisely what happened when it was taken up by the Social Darwinists of Germany.

These thinkers elaborated a whole new philosophy of society and history, according to which humanity could advance only through "natural selection". As they saw it, civilisation was upsetting the functioning of natural selection by the premium it put on humaneness and fairness, by its care for the weak and, in general, by the importance it attached to the individual human being. But they had also inherited the Hegelian (and Bismarckian) view of the State as an absolute value. Blending Hegelianism with Social Darwinism, they demanded that the State should subordinate everything to ensuring the long-term survival of the nation in what was imagined as an unending, infinitely ruthless struggle for existence. Nothing - neither existing social bonds and customs, nor existing cultural achievements, nor existing ideas of good and evil - must stand in the way of the progressive biological strengthening of the nation.

Already around 1900 some of the more radical of these Social Darwinists were insisting that the individual had no value save in so far as he contributed to the national capacity and will to survive. And they added that, by the law of nature, the stronger 'race' was entitled to dominate the weaker.

Here was something new. However full of cruelty and tyranny European history might have been in practice, the open glorification of ruthlessness as an ethical ideal, the systematic devaluation of the individual into a mere instrument of State and nation - these things represented a radical shift of values. They amounted to a repudiation of moral insights painfully achieved over 2000 years, and they pointed the way to the self-confessed and self-glorifying inhumanity of the Third Reich. And in due course they were to provide the inspiration, or the pretext, for the first of the great killings carried out under that regime: the mass 'euthanasia' of the inmates of mental hospitals, which started immediately on the outbreak of war in 1939.

Yet Social Darwinism and the Hegelian glorification of the State would never by themselves have generated the full-blown Nazi ideology of genocide. For this to happen, they had to be fused with an older idea, the myth of the superiority of the 'Aryan race'. Originally the term 'Aryan' had been applied to designate not a race but a group of languages. In 1786 the English orientalist Sir William Jones demonstrated the structural affinities between Sanskrit, Greek and Latin; and soon the term 'Aryan' was coined to designate these and other related languages, Germanic, Slavic and Celtic - in fact the whole group of languages now usually called Indo-European. Next the idea grew up that all peoples speaking these languages were descended from an 'Aryan race' which had spread outwards from the mountainous regions of Central Asia. By the middle of the nineteenth century it was possible for the eminent German Indologist Christian Lassen to write that "the Aryans form the most completely organised, the most enterprising and the most creative people". There were of course some

scholars who did their best to combat this absurd confusion between language and race. The great Anglo-German philologist Max Müller was emphatic:

"Aryas are those who speak Aryan languages whatever their colour, whatever their blood The blackest Hindus represent an earlier stage of Aryan speech and thought than the fairest Scandinavians To me an ethnologist who speaks of Aryan race, Aryan blood, Aryan eyes and hair, is as great a sinner as a linguist who speaks of a dolichocephalic dictionary or a brachycephalic grammar". Yet a deadly myth had been born, and rational argument proved quite unable to prevent its growth.

It was the French diplomat, traveller and man of letters, Count Gobineau, who first gave the myth a systematic and ostensibly scientific form. In his Essay on the inequality of human races (1853 - 1855) he argued that race was the decisive factor in history. Moreover, he established a hierarchy of races: the White race was the only one which had proved itself a truly creative force; the finest branch of the White race was the Aryan, and the finest branch of the Aryans was the Germanic or Nordic stock, which in his view had supplied the ruling aristocracy in all the highest civilizations. But for many centuries the Germanic aristocracy had been progressively bastardized by intermarriage with subject peoples belonging to other races; and this meant that history was in effect a process of degeneration, for which no remedy was possible.

Gobineau's ideas attracted little attention in France but were taken up with enthusiasm in Germany, undergoing a strange transformation in the process. For in Germany they were reinterpreted in terms of an outlook - the völkisch world-view - which was aggressively nationalistic, extremely reactionary and violently antisemitic. The beginnings of this outlook - it was really a pseudo-religion - go back to the Napoleonic Wars. Germany isn't by any means the only country which first began to develop a national consciousness as a result of being invaded - but it so happened that in this case the invading power was itself the standard-bearer of the modern age.

That is to say, France - revolutionary France - was the champion of democracy, and liberalism, and rationalism. It is normal to reject the values of the invader and to affirm the opposite values. But in the case of Germany, this meant that German nationalism was from the start partly backward-looking, partly inspired by a repudiation of modernity, and by a nostalgia for a past which was imagined in every way unlike the modern world. And this attitude did not simply persist - it was greatly intensified when economic developments pitchforked Germany into the modern world.

For at the heart of the völkisch outlook was a pseudo-historical fantasy. Its ideal was an archaic order of Germanic peasants, bound together by bonds of blood in a 'natural', 'organic' community; and the last 2000 years of history were supposed to represent a steady decline from that ideal, under the influence of the Jews. Already at the beginning of the 19th century, during and after the Napoleonic wars, popular demagogues like E.A. Arndt and F.L. Jahn extolled the idea of the superiority of German "blood", which had at all costs to be kept "pure" from Jewish or other contamination. When Gobineau's racist theories fused with this völkisch outlook, 'Aryan' was equated with 'German' and contrasted with Jewish; and history came to be seen as essentially an unending struggle between two supposedly biological entities, the 'German' and the 'Jewish races', for the domination of the world.

Social Darwinism, the Hegelian glorification of the state, the myth of the Aryan race, the völkisch world-view - these were all products of the nineteenth century, born in the brains of scientific or would-be scientific thinkers and writers. The idea of a Jewish conspiracy to dominate the world, on the other hand, was a fantasy which had flourished in the remote past, had lingered on down the centuries, and needed only to be modernized to regain its vitality.

Already in the second, third and fourth centuries after Christ, when the young Church was competing for converts with the Synagogue, Christian preachers were presenting Jews as mysterious, uncanny beings, united in the

service of Satan. Seven or eight centuries later, in the age of the Crusades, these ancient fantasies were revived and elaborated to the point where Jews were seen as incarnations of evil, given to murdering Christian children and poisoning wells. Already then there was talk of a secret council of rabbis, located in Moslem Spain, and supposed to be conducting, by means of sorcery, an underground war against Christendom. Repeatedly condemned by popes and bishops, these fabrications were nevertheless propagated by the lower clergy, and gradually permeated the consciousness of the laity. In the eyes of most Christians Jewry came to seem a conspiracy of demons in human form.

In the popular imagination this demonology always persisted; but with the French Revolution and the emancipation of the Jews, and as the nineteenth century brought its vast social and economic changes, the age-old nightmare began to take new forms. Out of the traditional fantasy of a secret council of sorcerer-rabbis there grew the myth of a secret Jewish government which was supposed to control, through a world-wide network of camouflaged agencies and organizations, all governments and political parties, the press and public opinion, banks and economic developments. The first writers to put this idea about were still mainly religious publicists - Roman Catholic in France, Germany and Austria, Greek Orthodox in Russia. For them the unfolding of the imaginary Jewish world-conspiracy was simply an expression of the eternal war of Satan against God. But when, in the 1870's, the myth of the Jewish world-conspiracy came into contact with the pseudo-scientific speculations of the völkisch and racist thinkers of Germany and Austria, the result was an ideology which was later to be used to justify the greatest massacres in all human history.

Between 1873 and 1881 three men - Paul Bötticher (who wrote under the name of Paul de Lagarde), Wilhelm Marr and Eugen Dühring - produced a series of books in which this ideology emerged in all its clarity. Now the Jews were shown not simply as evil but as irremediably evil - evil not simply because of their religion but because of their 'blood'. This 'blood' was

regarded as the driving force behind all those historical processes which were held to have undermined the true, original way of life of the German peasant. Historical Christianity itself was a Jewish creation which had helped to destroy the archaic Germanic world, and now capitalism, liberalism, democracy, socialism, and the urban way of life were continuing the work. Together these things made up the modern world, which was therefore quite literally an expression of the mysterious power of Jewish 'blood'.

In the 1890's this fantastic, pseudo-biological view of history and the world was popularised by one Theodor Fritsch, who proclaimed that by this 'scientific' discovery German racists were inaugurating not only a prodigious advance in human knowledge but a new epoch in human history. And then, in 1900, Houston Stewart Chamberlain - an Englishman by birth and the son of a British admiral, but a German by choice - published the two volumes of his Foundations of the Nineteenth Century. It was an eloquent work, with an appearance of learning, and it was to become the Bible of the Nazi leaders (which is not to say that many of them actually read it). Here all human history was presented as a bitter struggle between spirituality, carried in the 'blood' of the Germanic 'race', and materialism, carried in the 'blood' of the Jewish 'race'. As for the rest of humanity, that was simply a 'chaos of peoples', incapable of creativity or leadership and destined to be finally enslaved by one or other of the two true 'races'. So the fate of the whole world came to be imagined as hanging on the struggle between two biological entities, neither of which really existed.

Now this völkisch-racist outlook made its main appeal to certain sections of the middle class, and above all to artisans and small retailers. It has often been remarked that these people were particularly prone to antisemitism, and in due course they provided the bulk of the votes which brought Hitler to power. There is nothing mysterious about this. These sections of the population were survivals from an earlier age and they were gravely threatened by the development of modern capitalism. They lived in a

state of almost perpetual crisis. They were barely able to cope with the new world of giant industrial and commercial undertakings, and at the same time they lacked even that rudimentary understanding of this world which industrial workers received from their Marxist training. Artisans and small retailers struggled frantically to preserve their status and they felt an overwhelming need for a scapegoat.

The Jews were perfectly suited for this role - not because they occupied the commanding heights in the Germany economy, or because they were obviously well-to-do, or because they were obviously foreign. None of these things were true, though they were often said. The main factor was concentrations of small numbers of well-to-do Jews in certain areas of Berlin and Hamburg; concentrations which could lead the unthinking to suppose that all Jews were rich, or even that all rich people were Jews. And then there was the typical Jewish zeal in getting the sons to universities and thence into the liberal professions, and this brought them into direct conflict with the more aspiring members of the lower middle class.

However, the appeal of the völkisch-racist outlook was even stronger among the German element in the Habsburg empire than it was in Germany proper.- ~~in the Hohenzollern Empire.~~ On this Austrian periphery of the German-speaking world, where the German element felt isolated and threatened by the preponderant Slav element, the aggressive affirmation of German superiority had particular attractions. Moreover, Jews were far more conspicuous in Austria than in Germany, and they were conspicuous at both ends of the social scale. The great majority of Jews lived in appalling poverty. At the same time, a minority of Jews made up a large part of the professional class, and a few of them were bankers of great wealth. Now these Austrian Jews regarded themselves as belonging entirely to the German group in the Austro-Hungarian empire. But this did not help them at all; the Germans rejected them. And here, as in Germany, the most militant antisemites were to be found in the lower-middle class. When Hitler came to power in 1933 a joke circulated in Germany: that

Hitler was Austria's revenge for the defeat which she had suffered at the hands of Prussia in 1866. And there was a good deal in this, for the petty-bourgeois Hitler did indeed embody a whole century of frustration, disappointment, and insecurity; and the boundless lust for revenge which possessed him was a magnified version of something which possessed a whole stratum of Austrian society.

Already in the years immediately preceding the first world war, Austrian racists developed the cult of the swastika, and foretold that some day Jews would be castrated and killed under the aegis of the swastika. And in Austria too, a man called Georg von Schönerer set out to revive antique Germanic customs, such as the solstice festival. Meanwhile in Germany there appeared a multitude of more or less esoteric bodies such as the Order of Teutons and Volsungs, which also had the swastika as its emblem.

At that time, before the first world war, there were few who imagined that this völkisch-racist outlook would ever impinge much on practical politics. And it was in fact the outcome of the first world war which did enable it to penetrate. The humiliation of defeat and the great sufferings that followed it, the mortification which was felt in Germany over the peace treaty of Versailles, and in Austria over the peace treaty of St. Germain, but above all the absolute disorientation and the widespread financial ruin which accompanied the collapse of the currency - these things produced an entirely new atmosphere.

Already in 1919 there appeared an extreme right-wing body called the Deutsch-völkischer Schutz- und Trutzbund (the German völkisch Defensive and Offensive Alliance). This Alliance too had the swastika as its emblem and it quickly acquired a membership of 300,000. Meanwhile the old Order of Teutons and Volsungs continued to exist, also using the swastika. And in November 1918, just after the armistice, this Order produced a cover-organisation called the Thule Bund, and it was a couple of members of this Thule Bund who, early in 1919, founded the Nazi Party, to which, shortly after, Hitler was to belong.

All these organizations were indoctrinated with the völkisch-racist outlook in its most fanatical form. And in their hands there came, at the end of 1919 and the beginning of 1920, the Protocols of the Elders of Zion - a horror-comic fabrication, originally concocted by the secret police of tsarist Russia around 1897. As you no doubt know, the Protocols claim to lay bare the strategy and tactics of the secret Jewish government in its struggle for world-domination. In the eyes of the völkisch-racist groups the machinations of the Elders of Zion were the supreme expression of the characteristics which they attributed to the Jewish 'race'. The Jewish world-conspiracy was seen as the produce of an ineradicable destructiveness, a will to evil which was believed to be inborn in every Jew. As they saw it, a peculiar breed of creatures, dark and earthbound - the Jews - were working conspiratorial to destroy those sons of light, the 'Aryan' or Germanic 'race'; and the Protocols contained their plan of campaign.

All this would have been of little historical importance but for the personality of Hitler himself;- his fanaticism and his boundless lust for destruction. When these ideas were seized upon by Hitler's highly abnormal mind and made to serve his highly abnormal emotional needs they acquired a new and ^{deadly} ~~lethal~~ dynamism. Without Hitler they would have been simply items in the long history of misguided beliefs. Appropriated by him, they became a force in world-history.

* One of the most curious and least known sources for Hitler's outlook dates from before 1923 and consists of a little book by Dietrich Eckart, one of the founding members of the Nazi party and one of the very few real friends Hitler ever had. In this work, which carries the surprising title Bolshevism from Moses to Lenin: a dialogue between Adolf Hitler and myself, Hitler is shown expounding a whole 'philosophy of history', an interpretation of human existence from the beginning onwards. According to him, human history forms part of nature and follows the same laws as the rest of nature - and nature demands inequality, hierarchy, subordination of the inferior to the superior. Unfortunately the operation of this natural law has been constantly upset. The Jewish spirit, "which has been there from the beginning",

has again and again incited the lower orders to revolt, and this has led to ever greater egalitarianism. From Moses to Lenin (whom Hitler and Eckart both assumed to be Jewish), the Jews have been using the common people, who throughout the world consist of racially mixed and therefore inferior human material, to overthrow the upper classes, who throughout the world consist of racially pure Germans; and all with the object of furthering the Jewish drive for world-domination.

In a book which he wrote in 1928, but which remained unpublished and unknown until 1961, Hitler carried his argument a stage further. Here he argues that 'the Jew' does not merely use the racially impure masses for his purposes - he also ensures that they become more and more racially impure and therefore more and more amenable. This is accomplished by proclaiming "a general copulation with the aim of breeding a general inferior human mish-mash, by way of a chaotic bastardization". What these strange words really imply becomes apparant when one relates them to an astonishing passage in Mein Kampf: "If the Jew, with the help of his Marxist catechism, triumphs over the peoples of this world, his crown will be the dance of death for mankind, and as once before, millions of years ago, this planet will again sail empty of all human life through the ether I believe that I am today acting according to the purposes of the almighty Creator. In resisting the Jew, I am fighting the Lord's battle."

Taken together, these two passages go a long way to explain what the Germans did during the Second World War, and not only to the Jews. What Hitler means is that only a tiny part of what is usually regarded as mankind really consists of human beings - notably, those of pure Germanic 'blood'. The rest - the 'chaos of peoples' - belong not ^{to} mankind but to an inferior species. In using these creatures to kill off the ruling strata - who in Hitler's view must ipso facto be 'Germanic' - the Jew is therefore literally depriving the earth of its human population. What will be left will be simply animals disguised as human beings, under the leadership of Jews, who are demonic beings disguised as human beings.

These fantasies, which were eccentric and extreme even by the standards of traditional German racism, were all the more sinister because they could easily stir up hypochondriacal fears. Hitler himself was a hypochondriac, and it came naturally to him to formulate these imaginary historical processes and conflicts in terms of disease, infection, pestilence, and poison. "The discovery of the Jewish virus", he said to Himmler in 1942, "is one of the greatest revolutions that have taken place in the world. The battle in which we are engaged today is of the same sort as the battles waged during the last century, by Pasteur and Koch! How many diseases have their origin in the Jewish virus! We shall regain our health only by eliminating the Jew." The same imagery is to be found at all levels of Nazi propaganda. The weekly Der Stürmer, which had a circulation of nearly half a million, proclaimed: "The mobilization of the German peoples' will to destroy the bacillus lodged in its body is a declaration of war on all Jews throughout the world." Der Stürmer could also write this, referring to the Jews: "Bacteria, vermin and pests cannot be tolerated. For reasons of cleanliness and hygiene we must make them harmless by killing them off." But a professor in the University of Jena, too, could use similar language: "Any people that still keeps and protects Jews is just as guilty of an offence against public safety as someone who cultivates cholera germs without observing the proper precautions."

Such was the ideology behind the Nazi exterminations. Transmitted to the organizations of professional killers in the SS and SD (security service), it was used to justify not only the near-extermination of the European Jews, but also the decimation of the Poles and Russians. For it was an article of faith that these peoples, more than any others, had been "infected with the Jewish virus". It was above all with the Poles and Russians in mind that the following tract was issued by SS headquarters: "The sub-man - that creature which looks as though biologically it were of absolutely the same kind, endowed by Nature with hands, feet and a sort of brain,

with eyes and mouth - is nevertheless a totally different, a fearful creature, is only an attempt at a human being with quasi-human face, yet in mind and spirit lower than any animal And this underworld of sub-men found its leader: the eternal Jew!"

It should not be forgotten (~~though it commonly is~~) that the number of Poles and Russians who were murdered in cold blood - shot by firing-squads, starved to death behind barbed wire, herded into barns and burned alive - certainly exceeded six millions. The intention was to weaken these supposedly sub-human peoples to a point where they could be turned into slaves, almost into beasts of burden, under the iron rule of a "peasant aristocracy of Germanic blood".

It would be an absurd simplification to say that the colossal killings of Jews and Slavs were caused simply by an ideology. The men who perpetrated them were by no means all fanatics impelled by blind faith - they included plenty of cynical opportunists whose main concern was with personal gain or advancement; plenty of dutiful servants of State and party who simply did whatever they were told to do; and some natural killers who really enjoyed the work. All this is true - but it is also true that the whole murderous enterprise was carried out in the name of an ideology. And it is hardly conceivable that without that ideology it would have been carried out at all.